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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, it's been one of those weeks, and I'm beat. Not much time to think about an editorial topic, much less time to sit down and put it on paper. Or, in this instance, write it digitally.

It looks like we might be getting a break in the weather, for the better, finally. But I'm being a little tentative because we live in New England, after all! We never know what to expect here! But, I'm hoping that things start to warm up here soon so I can spend some time outside.

So, without any plans for this week's editorial, let's get on with this week's issue!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, another week has come and gone, and there have been a whopping TEN messages in the NewsGroup in the last seven days. I remember a time when you could almost count on ten an HOUR. I'll save those ten and add them to the pile for next week.

The decline of the NewsGroups makes me think back to the days when Atari was a 'player' in the computer market. Remember how cool it was when a leading computer magazine (was it BYTE?) referred to the ST as 'The Jackintosh'? Remember seeing the Atari 'fuji' logo in the movie Blade Runner? Remember the Atari Portfolio in Terminator2? Remember the obligatory 2600 game console in every kids movie made in those years? Yeah, those were the days!

I remember getting my first hard drive for the ST. It was a Supra shoebox... shoebox is right. It housed a half-height 5.25" MFM or RLL drive and a SCSI converter, a battery-backed clock and a SCSI/ACSI interface. It held, if I remember correctly, sixty megabytes. It took

all evening to format and partition it, and it cost me more than ten dollars per megabyte. A good deal at the time, but expensive as all hell by today's standards. It was heavy, sounded like a jet taking off, and generated a lot of heat. But it was a marvel to me, and I used to explain to other computer-heads that I could fit more than 80 floppies worth of stuff in that little box, not much bigger than the one my new pair of work boots came in.

Of course, the dealer I bought the drive from (he had to special order it from Supra) told me that I was crazy. "Who could ever use up 60 megabytes of storage? That's just insane!"

Of course, that was in the days before multi-megabyte video cards, downloadable videos and MP3, before all the miscellaneous stuff we take for granted today.

These days, I can carry a couple of gigabytes of storage on my keychain without even thinking about how amazing that is. My camera will hold more than a hundred times the amount of data on that old Supra drive on a piece of plastic-encased silicon smaller than a stick of gum. My cell phone has a removable card smaller than the fingernail on my pinkie that would hold every program and accessory ever written for the ST and Atari 800 combined. And yet, when I go into a store, I still look for a bigger one.

Now there are hacks around that will allow you to harness one of these solid state wonders to the ACSI connection of the ST so that you can save and retrieve data just like one of those old-time hard drives. Yes, some of them are slower than the old drives, but some are right around the same speed, and they're more reliable and more energy-efficient to boot (pun intended).

I remember the excitement I felt being able to finally download programs from CompuServe, Delphi and GEnie... and it all only took hours to do! Imagine the convenience of being able to telecommunicate at a whopping 2400 baud! Now my internet connection runs at around two thousand times faster, and there are still times when I get impatient! Of course, back then the best price I could get from CompuServe was about $18.00 an hour at lower baud speeds, so I'd cruise the forum at lower speeds to find what I wanted, make a note of it and then log in again at the higher, more expensive speed to download. I'll never forget how insanely mad I was one day when, about five minutes before a download was finished, my youngest sister picked up my phone to use it and broke my connection! A whole hour of downloading wasted! Today access to the entire internet for a month costs me what an HOUR used to when I connected to CompuServe at their highest speed.

All of this leaves me to wonder what the next decade will bring. Will our machines and connections and access to anything we could possibly think of continue to grow, or will we 'plateau' and settle in to a sense of normalcy about it all?

One memory keeps popping up in my mind. When I was in college and the Apple][was the hottest thing going (not even the][+, mind you), my professor answered a question about the computer's ability to mimic and/or create sound. "It'll never happen" he said off-handedly. "Computers generate sound in a square wave. It's 'digital', not analog like the way we make sound. It'll never be able to mimic a human voice, and certainly not be able to reproduce music so that you'd want to listen to it."

Well, he WAS right. Sound waves generated digitally are basically square waves. What he didn't take into account is the ability to 'speed things up' so that all those hard, square waves made a smooth analog-like curve. I found that professor online once. I teased him a bit about what he'd said and he was genuinely embarrassed about having been shortsighted.

I can't blame him for that blunder. I mean, who among us can envision what might be coming down the pike in the next decade? 3D displays and user interfaces? Multi-processors that can re-arrange themselves to suit their current tasks? Living or semi-biological processing colonies that can design and possibly even build new processors that will be able to do things that we can't even imagine right now?

There's a line from a Harry Chapin song that keeps hitting me when I talk about these things. The song didn't have anything to do with technology or computers, but the words fit... All the changes keep on changing.

My how times have changed!

Well, that's all for this week, folks. Next week, maybe we'll have enough messages to do a proper column. Find out next time by tuning in and turning on. Until then, keep your eyes on the horizon, your back to the wall, your shoulder to the wheel and your ear to the ground. Now just try getting some work done in that position! But regardless of what you do, keep your ears open so that you'll hear what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New Console Uses 3G to Beat Piracy!
No Disks Needed! Bane Or Boon?
Game Developers Choice Awards!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

New Game Console Uses 3G to Beat Piracy

A startup called Zeebo is marketing a new game console toward emerging markets, only using a 3G wireless network to download new games.

Zeebo will launch its console to Brazilian retailers next month, priced at the equivalent of $199. Zeebo said it is targeting the so-called BRIC market - Brazil, Russia, India and China - with plans to lower the price to $179 and even $149 next year. At its current price, the Zeebo console costs the same as an Xbox 360 Arcade; the popular Nintendo Wii costs $249.99 new.

Interestingly, the console's launch is designed to provide a competitive answer to, and to prevent, game piracy in the emerging markets. "Selling titles for only a slight premium over the gray market prices of the original titles, so consumers have no reason to leave home to shop" is one of the benefits of the new console that Zeebo touts on its Web site.

"The Zeebo console will deliver a truly engaging and entertaining gaming experience to a potential billion new consumers around the world, many of whom have never experienced gaming in the home," said John F. Rizzo, chief executive of Zeebo, in a statement. "The system provides an intuitive, quick, and easy-to-use home shopping user experience featuring popular, culturally optimized content from leading game publishers and developers around the world. It also delivers high value and warranty protection compared to gray-market products with no need for a separate wireless access plan."

In addition, content will only be able to be updated via a 3G network that the console will subscribe to. "Titles are authorized to work with a unique ID, assigned to each individual console," the company claims. "They are not portable, and cannot be moved between consoles via removable media cards. With no way to copy titles, the Zeebo system is effectively piracy-proof.

To minimize the bandwidth needed to download new games, and to also eliminate the costs associated with high-end CPUs and graphics chips, the Zeebo console specializes in older or less graphics-intensive games. On average, the company said, games will take up about 40 to 50 Mbytes on the console, and are stored in a built-in 1-Gbyte flash chip.

Four titles ship with the console: "FIFA Soccer '09," for soccer-mad Brazil; "Need for Speed: Carbon"; "Brain Challenge"; and "Prey Evil," a version of the PC game "Prey". The PC classic, "Quake" is also available as a free download, according to Zeebo.

Customers will purchases games via a points system similar to the Xbox Marketplace. Zeebo lists 15 other games that users are able to download, ranging from "Crazy Taxi" to "Resident Evil 4" to "Tekken 2" to "Duke Nukem 3D". The user interface uses the Qualcomm "BREW" development platform.

Users download content from the "Zeebonet," a 3G network accessed from the built-in quad-band GSM/GPRS/EDGE and tri-band UMTS/HSDPA/HSUPA radios built into the console.

From a hardware perspective, the Zeebo console is oriented around the Qualcomm Adreno 130 processor, with an unnamed embedded graphics chip performing the rendering operations in a maximum of 640x480 resolution across both PAL and NTSC displays. Games are stored in 1 Gbyte of flash memroy, with 256 Mbytes of RAM apportioned for operating memory. Three USB ports appear on the outside of the unit, which measures 157 x 215.4 x 44 mm.

No Disks Needed for Startup’s Streamed Video Games

Music and movies can be streamed over the Internet, so why not video games?

A startup founded by technology entrepreneur Steve Perlman says it has developed a technology to deliver video games on demand, an idea that threatens to eventually take consoles out of the equation.

OnLive Inc., Perlman’s Palo Alto, Calif.-based company, planned to unveil its technology Tuesday night at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco.

Seven years in the works, OnLive says it has developed a way to stream video games without any lag that humans can notice. So the instant you press a button to shoot something on the screen, the gun goes off.

This has not been possible before, because unlike with music and movies, which can be compressed - or put into smaller files that are more easily transferred online - before being streamed, video games are interactive and require instant responses. That has meant video games needed to be played on consoles packed with computing power, like the Xbox or the PlayStation, or downloaded to personal computers that could process some of the data that enabled games to run.

OnLive’s technology gets around that limitation with a new form of compression that lets its game servers communicate with players over broadband connections in real time. This also means OnLive’s service can work on older computers, even those without a graphics processing unit that has until now been an essential component of gaming. Through a "MicroConsole" about the size of a cassette tape, OnLive’s service will also be available for television sets.

In a recent demonstration, OnLive showed off "Crysis," a complex shooter game that’s currently only available for PCs, played on a TV set through the little "console" and on a Mac laptop.

"It’s the last console you’ll need," said Perlman, a former principal scientist at Apple who in 1995 co-founded WebTV, bringing Internet access to TV sets. He later sold WebTV to Microsoft Corp. for more than $500 million.

OnLive says it would be difficult for its users to exceed the monthly bandwidth caps that Internet service providers are increasingly placing on their subscribers. A typical user would have to play about 284 hours - nearly 12 full days - to consume Comcast Corp.’s 250-gigabyte cap. Nielsen Co. estimates many gamers play roughly 60 hours a month.

OnLive plans to launch its service late this year for monthly subscription fees it has not disclosed. Most big-name game publishers, like Electronic Arts Inc., Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. and Eidos Interactive Ltd., have signed on, and OnLive says upcoming games will be available on the service at the same time they are released in stores. OnLive’s investors include Time Warner Inc.’s Warner Bros., Autodesk Inc. and Maverick Capital.

Patrick Seybold, a spokesman at Sony Corp. - maker of the PlayStation consoles and publisher of titles like "Killzone 2" and "LittleBigPlanet"

- said the company has a "competitive offering for consumers" with games distributed via both the Internet and disks.

Although OnLive may seem to offer a different approach, Seybold said, consumers may end up paying more and possibly sacrifice performance "when you get this into a real-world environment where multiple devices are plugged into one broadband connection."

If OnLive takes off as its backers hope, it could be a blow to retailers like GameStop Corp., just as digital music sales are closing up record stores and drying up CD sales - not this year, or even next, but as inevitably as the death of the eight-track.

In fact, OnLive was the second major technology announced at the Game Developers Conference that relied on digital delivery. The Zeebo, an inexpensive video game console for emerging economies, downloads its games wirelessly rather than using disks.

"Retailers have a day of reckoning coming, and that’s digital distribution," said IDC video games analyst Billy Pidgeon.

Streaming Games Could Be Bane Or Boon for ISPs

Parents might get a new reason to yell at their kids for playing video games too much: In the future, it could rack up their Internet bills.

A service unveiled this week aims to stream video games over the Internet, setting gamers on a collision course with cable and phone companies that are seeking to curb growing demands on their networks by charging for heavy usage.

OnLive Inc., a startup from Palo Alto, Calif., revealed its service Tuesday night at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. Users would get a small, simple device to connect to their TVs, or they could run the application on a PC. Their screens would receive the game video from OnLive’s servers, which would do the data-crunching needed to render a richly detailed environment. No game console or high-end gaming PC would be needed.

It’s uncertain how well OnLive would work in homes; there has been no widespread customer trial. It is clear, though, that it would consume large amounts of bandwidth, far higher than that required for current online games, where most of the content is stored on the computer or console.

The company puts the data usage at just under a gigabyte per hour of high-definition gaming. The only Internet application with comparable consumption is high-definition video, like movies bought through iTunes, watched on Netflix Inc.’s streaming service, or downloaded from file-sharing networks.

Internet service providers are already girding for rising use of Internet video by placing monthly limits on the amount of traffic their subscribers can use. The approach varies. Some are setting limits so high than only a small fraction of users ever reach them. For instance, Comcast Corp., the country’s second-largest ISP, limits usage to 250 gigabytes per month, and cuts off repeat violators. OnLive says its

users would need to play around the clock for nearly 12 straight days to reach that.

However, other Internet service providers are trying lower limits, then charging extra for those who go over. It’s not clear which approach will win out, but subscribers on low-limit ISPs could quickly find themselves paying far more for their Internet connection, particularly since many gamers spend more than 20 hours a week on a game.

Frontier Corp., a regional phone company, has alerted its customers that it plans to charge extra for usage above 5 gigabytes per month. That’s 5 hours and 40 minutes of OnLive gaming, if the connection is used for nothing else. Time Warner Cable Inc., the country’s third-largest ISP, is testing four plans with different caps in Beaumont, Texas. The highest provides 40 gigabytes per month. Every gigabyte above that, or a bit more than hour of OnLive gaming, would cost a dollar.

Time Warner Cable spokesman Alex Dudley say the fees are a way to finance the network, by charging more for those who use their connection the most.

Derek Turner, research director at media and Internet advocacy group Free Press, said the bandwidth caps are "misguided" because they can stifle new applications like OnLive that add value to an Internet connection.

Also, he said, the profit margins on Internet connections are very high, and it’s not clear that ISPs need to increase their fees to finance upgrades, especially since the cost of network hardware keeps falling.

Utah Governor Vetoes Video Game Bill

Utah Governor Jon Huntsman (R) has vetoed HB353, a bill in Utah that proponents had hoped would impose fines upon retailers who sold children violent video games. Announcing the veto in a letter sent to Utah’s speaker of the House and Senate president, Huntsman said the bill would likely face stiff constitutional opposition, were it passed into law.

The bill has met with controversy since it was first put on the floor of the Utah legislature for consideration, partly for its contents and partly for its pedigree: Jack Thompson purportedly was involved with its creation. He’s an avid proponent of restricting or abolishing the sales of violent video games. A frequent guest on talk shows and news programs focusing on violent video games, Thompson is an attorney in Florida who was disbarred in October, 2008.

Huntsman’s move has surprised many watchers from the sideline, as HB353 passed quickly with the approval of both Utah’s House and Senate; legislators overwhelmingly approved the bill.

In rejecting HB353, Huntsman writes, "While protecting children from inappropriate materials is a laudable goal, the language of this bill is so broad that it likely will be struck down by the courts as an unconstitutional violation of the Dormant Commerce Clause and/or the First Amendment."

Huntsman’s opinion mirrors that previously made by the Entertainment

Software Association (ESA), a video game industry group which has successfully overturned every other state law that's been put into effect to regulate the sale of video games.

HB353, which would amend Utah's "Truth In Advertising Act," sought to restrict the sale of games rated "M" for "Mature" or "A" for "Adults Only" by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). Such games are intended specifically for players 17 years old and older. Retailers found violating this would be subject to fines, hence, "truth in advertising."

The ESRB rating system, much like the motion picture rating system upon which it's based, is an entirely voluntary program, though it has the backing of major U.S. game publishers and national retailers of video games. And studies, including studies done by the U.S. government, show that the system works, and has been working increasingly in recent years, as the ESA and other groups have put more pressure on retailers to comply.

Critics pointed out a loophole in Utah's amendments, however "retailers wouldn't be fined if they didn't sell products with age-appropriate labeling." It's this that stuck Huntsman from signing the bill into law.

"Therefore, the unintended consequence of the bill would be that parents and children would have no labels to guide them in determining the age appropriateness of the goods or service, thereby increasing children's potential exposure to something they or their parents would have otherwise determined was inappropriate under the voluntary labeling system now being recognized and embraced by a significant number of vendors," Huntsman concluded.

'LittleBigPlanet' Wins Big at Video Game Awards

"LittleBigPlanet" sacked the competition to win four trophies at the Game Developers Choice Awards.

Developed by Media Molecule, the cutsey PlayStation 3 adventure game which allows players to create and share their own levels was honored for best game design, debut, technology and innovation at the Game Developers Conference ceremony Wednesday evening.

Bethesda Softworks' "Fallout 3" seized the evening's top prize. The post-apocalyptic shooter, which is set in the ruins of Washington, D.C., blasted fellow nominees "LittleBigPlanet," Valve Software's "Left 4 Dead," Lionhead Studios' "Fable II" and Rockstar Games' "Grand Theft Auto IV" to win game of the year. "Fallout 3" was also awarded the best writing trophy.

"I was a nerd growing up in South Boston," said "Fallout 3" lead writer Emil Pagliarulo during his acceptance speech. "To all the nerds growing up in South Boston, don't play hockey. Don't join Little League. Stay in your room, read your Lloyd Alexander and play 'Dungeons and Dragons.' It all works out in the end."

Selected by a jury of game creators, the Game Developers Choice Awards honor the best games of the past year. The lively ninth annual ceremony was hosted by "Psychonauts " and "Brutal Legend" developer Tim Schafer.

The show was capped off with the debut teaser trailer for "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2," the upcoming sequel to the best-selling game of 2007.

Other winners at the ceremony at the Moscone Convention Center were Ubisoft Montreal's "Prince of Persia" for best visual art, Ready at Dawn Studios' "God of War: Chains of Olympus" for best handheld game, EA Redwood Shores' "Dead Space" for best audio and 2D Boy's "World of Goo" for best downloadable game.

"Video Games Live" concert series co-founder Tommy Tallarico was awarded the ambassador trophy. Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy, co-founders of "Rock Band" developer Harmonix, received the pioneer award. "Metal Gear Solid" creator Hideo Kojima was bestowed with the lifetime achievement award.

"I wanted to give my speech in English, but this is GDC," joked the veteran Japanese designer while accepting his lifetime achievement award. "All of this will be up on YouTube. If I make a mistake, it could stay on the net for the next century, so please allow me to read my speech."

Earlier in the evening, several trophies were handed out at the 11th annual Independent Games Festival Awards. Erik Svedang's "Blueberry Garden" won the top honor, taking home the $30,000 Seumas McNally grand prize for best independent game. Other winners included Jason Rohrer's "Between," Data Realms' "Cortex Command" and KranX Productions' "Musaic Box."

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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Videogame Museum Opens in Rochester, New York

You know you've reached a certain age when the elements that defined your childhood become "artifacts" in a museum. A whole generation is about to have that experience when the National Center for the History of Electronic Games opens its doors in Rochester, New York. According to a Eurogamer report, the museum includes over 15,000 objects covering all aspects of electronic gaming, including early console systems such as the Atari 2600 and Colecovision as well as handhelds and gadgets such as the Microvision, Mattel's Electronic Football, and Simon. Also inclded are a plethora of advertising, television commercials and instruction manuals. Sections of the exhibit focus on all aspects of the hobby including game developers, players, controversies, and the games themselves.

A quick persusal of the NCHEG Web site reveals the center to be part of the Strong National Museum of Play, a family-oriented museum that focuses on toys and games. The site also reveals that this appears to be a bit more than just a nostalgic collection of memorabilia. There definitely seems to be a scholarly dedication to actually curating these objects and properly placing them within a hstorical context that will shed light on

the role of electronic gaming in society. Of course the place offers birthday party packages, so take that for what it’s worth.

Allen says: I don’t know about you, but I just found the location for my next vacation. Fortunately I’m originally from New York and I do go back to Long Island occasionally for visits so maybe there’s a chance I can convince my wife to take a good five- or six-hour drive... to see a videogame museum. Sigh. I’m never getting there.

On a purely up note, let’s hope this is a serious effort to preserve the early history of electronic gaming. One of the great tragedies of the film world is that so little of the output prior to the 1930s actually survives - particularly the work of the silent era. At the time, the culture czars also thought that movies were disposable trash entertainment not worthy of serious study, and as a result we lost priceless pieces of cultural history. Yes. I just referred to Nintendo’s Game & Watch as "a priceless piece of cultural history."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Adoption of Internet Explorer 8 Slows

Adoption of Microsoft’s new Internet Explorer Web browser appeared to be leveling off Monday after peaking at 2.58 percent of all Internet users over the weekend, reports Net Applications. IE8’s share of the global market was down to 2.02 percent on Monday at noon, equivalent to the new browser’s adoption rate at 5 p.m. Friday - the first full business day after its release.

Microsoft’s relatively quiet rollout of IE8 stands in stark contrast to the excitement that Mozilla generated when it released Firefox 3 to great fanfare on June 17. By the start of the following month, Mozilla’s new browser had already captured a 4.34 percent share of the global browser market.

One reason for IE8’s slow adoption is clearly due to Internet Explorer’s enduring strength as the Web platform of choice among enterprises, which are always cautious when it comes to adopting a new browser, noted Gartner Research Vice President and Distinguished Analyst Michael Silver. "While the promise of browser-based applications was that migration would not be necessary, some applications are still written to specific browsers," Silver said.

This helps explain why IE6, which was introduced in 2001, still has 18.85 percent of the global browser market, just behind the 19.11 percent share held by Firefox 3. "IE6 seems to be a particular problem, with many IE6 applications not working properly on IE7 or IE8," Silver said.

"This has prevented many organizations from upgrading beyond IE6 and has even delayed some Vista migrations," Silver said. "This is likely to continue being a problem in the Windows 7 time frame as, again, IE6 cannot be run on that platform."

On the consumer side, IE8's slow gallop out the starting gate suggests that Microsoft hasn't made a good case for why users should upgrade from previous Internet Explorer releases or switch from the rival Firefox, Chrome and Opera browsers. If anything, the fact that IE8 now looks and feels much like Firefox 3.0 makes it that much harder for Microsoft to attract trend-conscious users looking for the next best thing.

Microsoft says Internet Explorer 8 is a leap forward in support for the latest Web standards. "We believe that IE8 has the first complete implementation of CSS 2.1 in the industry and it is fully compliant with the current CSS 2.1 test suite," said Internet Explorer Test Manager Jason Upton.

But the downside to Microsoft's embrace of the latest Web standards is that some early adopters are finding that IE8 will not display some Web pages accurately. Users who fail to select IE8's Compatibility View option are bound to be disappointed when viewing Web pages incompatible with the latest Web publishing standards.

Though IE8 has received high marks from many security experts, some Internet users seem reluctant to switch to the new browser until a general consensus has been reached that Microsoft has plugged all potential exploit holes. To this end, it didn't help Microsoft last week when white-hat security experts were able to exploit vulnerabilities in IE8 during the annual PWN2OWN contest at CanSecWest.

By contrast, Google's Chrome browser emerged from the event unscathed. What makes Chrome different from other browsers is the product's use of "an innovative multiprocessed sandboxing architecture, where each process is isolated and stripped of most of its privileges to prevent it from accessing other components of the user's computer," Google said.

Verizon Plans To Sell Netbooks

Verizon Wireless will start selling a netbook - a cheaper, more basic version of a notebook - as early as next quarter, Bloomberg said, citing a person close to the project.

The devices are being developed with more than one PC maker, the news agency cited the person as saying. Price and plan details aren't complete, the person told the news agency.

Verizon Wireless, owned by Verizon Communications Inc and Britain's Vodafone Group Plc, competes with AT&T and Sprint Nextel in the wireless carrier market.

Verizon Wireless and AT&T see devices used mainly for data rather than voice as the next phase of wireless growth as the vast majority of the U.S. population owns mobile phones.

Facebook Holds the Line Against Spammers, Scammers

Facebook is shoring up its security protection procedures as the social-networking site increasingly comes under attacks from spammers, data thieves and other tricksters, according to the company's chief privacy officer.

Facebook, which has about 100 million daily visitors and about 175 million registered users, has come under scrutiny over how it manages user data as well as how it lets users control who sees their own data. That aggregation of data, as well as high numbers of visitors, makes the site attractive to miscreants and cybercriminals.

"Obviously, we've become a very large target for people trying to hack the site, trying to spam people on the site," said Chris Kelly, who is also the company's head of global public policy, during a presentation at the E-crime Congress in London on Tuesday. "In those rare occasions where these attempts get through, we learn very quickly."

Facebook has an automated system in place that's designed to either stop or eliminate fake profiles, one of the weaknesses of social networks. It looks for odd behavior, such as having lots of friend requests rejected or too many searches conducted in a short period of time, which can indicate the use of scripts or a bot, Kelly said.

Chat messages and wall posts are also analyzed to see if they contain links to bad Web sites or are posted across a high number of profiles.

Facebook takes down thousands of fake accounts per week, some designed to spam people or perpetrate fraud, Kelly said. The site also heavily relies on its users to report fake profiles, an additional mechanism that the company calls "community verification."

Additionally, Facebook has two security teams - one in California and one in Dublin - that will review reports of nudity, pornography or harassment within 24 hours and other e-mail complaints within three days, since those requests are often more complex, Kelly said.

As far as upcoming features, the company plans to integrate more granular controls over how users can share data with friends, Kelly said. "You'll see this get more extensive over time rather than less," he said. That will allow users to carefully parse what groups of friends they want to share information with.

Still, if users really do not want anyone else to see a bit of information, they should not put it on Facebook at all, Kelly said.

"If you want something to stay truly secret, Facebook is not the site for you," Kelly said.

In other Facebook news, the company is moving ahead with new terms of use. Facebook came under criticism in mid-February after it modified its terms of use in a way that appeared to give the company perpetual control over material posted to the site, even if it was deleted. In the wake of the controversy, Facebook reverted back to its previous terms while launching a process to let users help create new terms.

The site has two documents open for public comment through Sunday: "Principles and the "Statement of Rights and Responsibilities," the latter

of which will evolve into new terms of use. After Sunday, Facebook will respond to the comments, and then a ratification process will begin, Kelly said.

Nasty New Worm Targets Home Routers, Cable Modems

A computer worm has been discovered that can infect 55 different home-based routers and DSL/cable modems including common brands like Linksys and Netgear.

Believed to have originated in Australia and known as "psyb0t" or Bluepill, this is the first worm known to be able to infect residential routers and modems.

Psyb0t is armed with 6000 common usernames and 13,000 popular passwords that it tries in various combinations to gain entry to your home network. Most home-based routers will give you unlimited attempts to get the username and password correct, making these devices an ideal target for infection. Also, unlike your PC, your router and modem are running 24 hours a day meaning psyb0t has a relatively unlimited amount of time to try and gain access.

If that wasn’t frightening enough, psyb0t is reportedly very hard to detect and most home users will be unaware that they’re infected. Like other worms, psyb0t is designed to infect systems and then carry out commands given by its author, creating what is known as a botnet. There may not be much cause for alarm, though, as APC Magazine is reporting that the botnet capabilities for this worm are no longer active. At its height, psyb0t was suspected of controlling 80,000 tio 100,000 systems.

The DroneBl blog - a real-time tracker that looks for botnets - says the threat psyb0t poses or could have posed is overstated. DroneBL believes this is not an "end of the world, all routers are vulnerable" thing. But the appearance of psyb0t is troubling because it is so hard to detect and could be used to steal "personally identifying information," the blog adds.

While the threat posed by psyb0t may not be high, it is still extremely important to take precautionary measures against this kind of attack. The best way to protect yourself is to make sure you are not using the default password and username that came with your equipment. Consult the materials that came with your device or the manufacturer’s website for instructions on how to change your username and password. If you’re worried you have been infected, a simple factory reset of your device will kill the worm.

Conficker Worm Will Call Home on April Fools’ Day

April 1 brings on the age-old tradition of jokes and pranks. But this year, April 1 will be more than just April Fools’ Day.

The first day of April 2009 is when security analysts around the world will watch to see what happens to thousands of computers because of the

Conficker worm, a family of malware that is now widespread and affecting 10 million computers.

Conficker, also known as Downadup, is spread in three ways, including via exploit, weak passwords, and the use of autorun.inf files which are copied to USB drives.

Graham Cluley, a security analyst with Sophos, said it’s not possible for analysts to figure out what the payload could be because it’s not yet present in the Conficker code.

"Some people have got rather confused as to what the April 1st deadline really means," Cluley said in an official blog post. "The truth is that Conficker is not set to activate a specific payload on April 1st. Rather, on April 1st Conficker will begin to attempt to contact the 50,000-a-day potential call-home Web servers from which it may receive updates."

Beyond that, Cluley said there’s no guarantee the download will even occur on the first day of April. It all depends on when the authors of the malicious code choose to register a domain out of the 50,000 listed each day.

Jart Armin, a security expert with HostExploit, agrees. "The April 1st date would appear to be speculation; in the four or so worm variations seen so far, all have had various ’call home for an update’ dates, times and varying locations," Armin said. "Conficker remains a dangerous threat, but its masters are obviously playing a cat-and-mouse game with the community, constantly matching any publicized anti-measures, and it’s normal business as usual for malware in general."

Armin warned that the authors of the code may be using April Fools’ Day to distract people while they commit other attacks. "It is important to remember, when observing illusionists as in this case, to also watch what the other hand is being used for," he said.

While the Conficker masters iron out details, businesses are planning countermeasures to fight the virus.

In February, Microsoft announced a collaboration dubbed the Conficker Cabal with other industry leaders, including AOL, F-Secure, Arbor Networks, and VeriSign, to put together a coordinated response to the worm.

The software giant has been working with the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and operators of Domain Name Systems to find a way to disable the domains targeted by Conficker. Microsoft has also posted a $250,000 bounty for information that results in the arrest and conviction of those responsible for launching the malicious code.

Site Hacks, Fake Security Rakes in Serious Cash

Here’s a recipe for illicit online riches:

1. Hack a Web site to insert pages full of keywords to popular terms. 2. Redirect the millions of people who click on the search result links to the fake pages to a site selling rogue antivirus software. 3. Sit back and collect affiliate fees from the rogue software seller, to the tune

of up to $10,000 a day.

Web security company Finjan gathered details on this kind of operation after gaining access to a traffic management server used by the bad guys. The redirection that started with a poisoned search link went through the traffic servers on the way to rogue AV sites, allowing Finjan to observe the process.

The company found that crooks were hacking legitimate Web sites to insert parasite pages stuffed full of search terms pulled from the Google Trends system, along with others with minor typos from real terms like Gogle or Obbama.

These fake pages, designed to get search engines to find and display the pages in online searches, would redirect anyone who clicked on them to a site selling rogue AV software. Pushing the fake apps has become a popular profit-making technique among online crooks, and for good reason.

Finjan found that affiliate programs from the crap software pushers pay hackers 9.6 cents per redirection to the software-selling sites. That adds up to serious cash when you're talking about 1.8 million unique user redirections in 16 consecutive days, as Finjan observed.

Of those 1.8 million users, 1.79 percent of them paid $50 for the fake AV software. The software sellers used those profits to pay a total of $172,000 - or $10,800 per day - to affiliates.

With numbers like these, it's no surprise that rogue antivirus is becoming more common. And its spread doesn't just hurt those who get conned out of $50 or more for the software. Search engines will typically penalize sites that they believe are trying to game the system by stuffing pages full of random search terms, Finjan says. So the legitimate sites that get hacked may be penalized and see their real pages drop in search engine rankings.

With Limited Resources, UK Vows to Battle E-crime

A new U.K. police force dedicated to tracking down cybercriminals is gearing up to make the most of what one senior police official acknowledges is limited funding.

The Police Central e-crime Unit, due to begin operations soon, came to be as part a comprehensive overview of how the U.K. handles fraud and e-crime after years of criticism that the government wasn't doing enough.

The unit will receive £7 million (US$10 million) in funding over the next three years from the Home Office and Metropolitan Police.

"This is not a lot of money," said Janet Williams, deputy assistant commissioner in the Specialist Crime Directorate of the Metropolitan Police Service, during a presentation at the E-crime Congress in London on Wednesday.

Overall, the strategy for dealing with e-crime will be increased training for law enforcement, linking different law enforcement agencies and allying with private industry.

Of the 43 police forces in England and Wales, "only a handful of high-tech investigators" are in those jurisdictions, William said. Additionally, it's likely that specific computer forensics equipment would have to be shared between jurisdictions.

As far as training, Williams said they would like to see many law enforcement officials get basic training in dealing with electronic crime. Other investigators can get more specific training, such as the right way to collect electronic evidence for presentation in court cases, Williams said.

There's been a "huge backlog" in cases dealing with child pornography, as investigators are having trouble analyzing data. Investigators should have the skills to be able to triage a digital crime case "so they're not bringing the whole computer and locking everything up for three months but we go for what we need in order to prove the case," Williams said.

She cautioned, however, that the unit will not be able to handle every cybercrime incident.

"What I'm not saying and have never said, and I've been very clear about, is that the national e-crime unit ... can investigate all e-crime," Williams said. "That is never going to happen. We haven't got the capability or the capacity."

U.K. law enforcement is also preparing for an expected increase in fraud and e-crime related to hosting the Olympics in 2012. An Olympic e-crime assessment has been completed, and a business case has been put forward to the Home Office to fund the effort.

Of concern are possible denial-of-service attacks on Olympic Web sites, Williams said. Also, officials have already seen suspicious domain names registered for Olympic-related businesses.

"We are already seeing some sort of precursor-type activity," Williams said in a subsequent interview with IDG News Service. Some domain-name registrations are raising concerns: "We're thinking from the nature of the registration 'Are these legitimate companies or not?'"

Australia Says Web Blacklist Combats Child Porn

Australia's communications minister has defended a proposed Internet blacklist as necessary to combat child pornography but admitted that at least one site had been wrongly blocked during trials.

Stephen Conroy also told Australian Broadcasting Corporation television on Thursday night that the blacklist was not censorship of the type practiced by China or Saudi Arabia.

"It is possible to support a blacklist and support free speech," Conroy said. He did not explain how.

His comments came a week after a whistle-blower organization published a list of 2,400 sites that it said were on the government's secret blacklist, including a dentist's office, poker sites and a PG-rated site displaying images by a controversial Australian photographer.

Conroy said the dentist’s site had been hacked and child pornography photos were posted. The office confirmed last week it had been hacked more than a year ago, and visitors were temporarily redirected to an adult Web site. The office said it quickly switched to a different Internet provider and hasn’t had a problem since.

The minister said a site showing photos by Bill Henson, whose images of nude children have caused complaints by child advocates, was also wrongly blocked because of a "technical issue."

The blacklist, maintained by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, is provided to creators of Internet filtering software that people can opt to install on their computers.

But Conroy wants a mandatory implementation of the blacklist by all Internet service providers. That would make Australia one of the strictest Internet regulators among democratic countries.

The proposal has prompted protests across the country, with critics slamming it as censorship. Internet providers argue that a filter could slow browsing speeds, and point out that illegal material such as child pornography can be traded on peer-to-peer networks or chats, which would not be covered by the filter.

Several Internet providers are conducting trials of the filter through June though three of Australia’s biggest ISPs have withdrawn from the trial.

The authority said the list largely contains the addresses of Web sites promoting child pornography and sexual violence, but it has refused to release its contents publicly.

Conroy said the list was needed to tackle pro-rape, pro-child pornography and pro-incest Web sites, adding it would give parents the choice to block certain sites.

But opposition politician Greg Hunt warned there was a danger of the government encroaching on political freedoms to combat the "worst of the worst" Web sites.

"We need to increase the resources to take on people who will engage in child pornography and increase penalties for those acting illegally," Hunt said.

Facebook Caves to User Gripes Over Redesign

Facebook says it will tweak its homepage in the coming weeks in direct response to user uproar over recent designs changes. The social network caved to customer feedback against the site’s recent improvements and says it decided to listen to the millions asking for less change.

Chris Cox, Facebook Director of Product, posted last night on the Facebook Blog a lengthy explanation of the features the social network is going to look into tweaking after the colossal user feedback. The most changes will be seen in the users’ streams, which will finally get live updating and friend list filters.

"Redesigns are generally hard to manage, in part because change is always hard and in part because we may miss improvements that any individual user may like to see," said Chris Cox in his blog post. This week, change was hard on almost two million Facebook users, which joined petition groups campaigning against the site's latest improvements.

The stream, the central dashboard on the main Facebook page, is the part that will see the most significant changes. Facebook claims that this is where the most user feedback was focused on, so they decided to concentrate on "improvements immediately and over the next several weeks."

Live stream updating "will be adding the ability to turn on auto updating in the near future so you no longer need to refresh the page." Also, if one of your friends is tagged in a photo, it will appear in your stream. Users had to hit the refresh button on their browser every time they wanted to see new items on their stream.

Other tweaks include moving friend requests notifications and event invites to the top of the left column and a friends list which will allow users to create a new list of friends with which to filter the stream. However, application bookmarks will continue to live in the toolbar at the bottom left of the page.

Certainly most of the unhappy users will be fairly content with Facebook's decision to listen to their feedback, but critics actually think this is a bad decision. Judged by numbers, around just one percent of Facebook users complained about the site's latest redesign. Still, in numbers alone, two million sounds a lot.

But as some point out, Facebook has enforced several times now redesigns on its users and ignored their complaints. This time round though, just like with the site's Terms of Service, the number of users complaining grew tenfold (around 200,000 last year and just under two million over the last week) Facebook might have thought that they couldn't risk losing such a large number of users.

Computer on 24-7? You're Wasting $2.8 Billion Per Year

The environmental damage caused by continuously idle computers is nothing new. However, even in these dire economic straits nearly half of U.S. workers who use a PC at work do not shut it down at night.

These constantly powered, unused computers waste $2.8B a year, according to the 2009 PC Energy Report - an international study released Wednesday by UK software company 1E and the Alliance to Save Energy. How many machines did it take to wreak such eco havoc? In the United States alone that number came to a staggering 108 million, according to the study.

Idling computers are projected to emit 20 million tons of carbon dioxide by year's end - equivalent to emissions from 4 million cars. To avoid this, 1E and the Alliance to Save Energy recommend simple, non-intrusive green IT practices.

"Employers today have a golden opportunity to demonstrate their environmental and financial leadership by taking a few simple, energy-saving measures, like setting up processes to power down PCs,"

said Sumir Karayi, CEO of 1E. "Shutting down PCs when not in use will help businesses to significantly reduce costs while preventing tons of CO2 from being emitted into our atmosphere."

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